Religion and Uncertainty
Hebrews 13:8 and Selected
September 19, 1971
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Carl Sandberg, great American poet and author, is known in literary circles for his ability to capture the mood of a city or nation in single story or poem. Consider this one. Sandburg writes of the early days when he rode railroads back and forth across the country, "I have always enjoyed riding up front in a smoking car, in a seat back of the 'deadheads', the railroaders going back to the home base. Their talk about each other runs free . . . Once I saw a young fireman in overalls take a seat and slouch down easy and comfort-able. After a while a brakeman in a blue uniform came along and planted himself alongside the fireman. They didn't say anything. The two of them didn't even look at each other. Then the brakeman, looking straight ahead, was saying, 'Well, what do you know today?' and kept looking straight ahead till suddenly he turned and stared the fireman in the face, adding, 'For sure'. I thought it was a keen and intelligent question. 'What do you know today - for sure?' I remember the answer. It came slow and honest. The fireman made it plain what he knew that day for sure: 'Not a damn thing.'" [cited by George F. Peters, Interpreting the Times on the Protestant Hour, p. 3]

That little vignette, I would suggest, is a fair description of modern man. I've used that idiom, "What do you know for sure?" as a greeting. And I've responded to it in the same general way as the young railroader, "Not a thing." And it occurs to me that of all the men who have walked the face of the earth you and I are sure of less and uncertain of more than any other.

Let's think about that for a moment. Modern science, in its constant pursuit of something called truth, continues to destroy certainties of the past. In the early part of this century, the laboratory people were telling the world that we had about learned all there was to know: that science had brought to light all the facts there were and mankind could settle down to tha task of assimilating this now complete encyclopedia of knowledge. But then, with the research that accompanied World War II we were hit with

something called the "knowledge explosion"; the nuclear age, the age of computers and rocketry. And suddenly we find ourselves thrust into the space age with the scientists now telling us that we've only begun to scratch the surface. Today scientists tell us to beware of certainty: because today's "natural law" just may become tomorrow's old wive's tale, They've seen it happen.

At the same time scientific certainty has been shattered by the knowledge explosion, a lot of other hallowed and time honored truths have gone by the wayside. I can recall asking my father one time, as we drove past a coal mine, what would happen when there was no more coal in the earth. His answer was simple and reflected the certainty of twenty-five years ago - "It won't ever happen". I can recall studying Thomas Malthers in college, who suggested in the last century that the geometric progression of population growth would one day result in mass starvation. And the professor told us that Malthers arrived at that conclusion without knowing about birth control and modern farming techniques. That was just fifteen years ago. In the meantime Malthers has become a prophet and the heady optimism that life will be supported indefinitely by the good green earth has been called into serious question. We're not so sure of that any more. We're not at all certain.

Time was, not long ago, when the integrity of the American government, not to mention the American dollar, was a vertible bastion of certainty. But for a growing number of people the Viet Nam debacle is changing that. And government policies that talk about equal rights in one section of the country and the sanctity of the neighborhood school in another call that into serious question.

It's a time of serious uncertainty for our nation. We don't know where we are headed internationally: the certainties of the post war world are gone. We seem to know even less about where we are going domestically: the tranquility of the Eisenhower years and the bright hope of John Kennedy's new frontier seem like dreams out of the dim past. Certainty, on all fronts

has given way to uncertainty. What do we know for sure? Not really very much.

The Church of Jesus Christ has not held up very well in the new age of uncertainty. In fact, it might be said that the very concept of uncertainty runs against the grain of what the church is all about. A less charitable way of saying it is that the church has always been a kind of historical know-it-all. After all it did take the church a long time to stop resisting men like Galileo and Copernicus. And many modern churchmen are still fighting Charles Darwin. It seems that the church has always had a difficult time admitting that it doesn't have all the answers. And as a corollary to that, it seems that the church has always been inclined to give the stamp of eternal, absolute truth to everything about itself.

Now we Presbyterians never had an inquisition, but our heritage and traditions and identity did come out of a period of history marked by its sense of certainty. The Protestant Reformation happened in the middle of an intellectual environment that proudly assumed that the mind of man could comprehend everything there was to comprehend. When they sat down to write theology they assumed that they could describe the very essence of God in a long list of adjectives. I found the recent television series "The Six Wives of Henry VIII" very interesting at this point. Whatever else Henry was he was not uncertain, so long as the Archbishop of Cantebury was at his side. Regardless of what he did, he did it in full confidence that God would bless it - whether making war or arranging a marriage - so long as the Archbishop nodded.

Protestantism was born in that kind of climate. Whenever the reformers condemned the Pope they did it confidently. Whenever they wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith they did so with no "ifs' and "buts". And quickly the church of the Reformation - Presbyterian and Lutheran - committed the same error that the Church of Rome had been committing for centuries: it baptized its creeds, rituals, traditions, everything about it, with ultimate and absolute truth. It was right - it was certain of its rightness. Thus we

have Methodists, Baptists, Reformed Churches, Disciples, Episcopalians - all claiming, if not in words at least by innuendo, absolute certainty.

That is the gravest sin of the church and the fact is that there is still a lot of that old certainty in its ranks. There is still a very vocal brand of Christianity, and brand of Christians, characterized by smugness, self-righteousness and pious arrogance. There is still a highly visible brand of religion that knows all the answers, that refuses to be open to new truth, that has a Biblical proof text ready for every conceivable situation.

The result for the whole church is simply a lack of credibility. We live in an uncertain age, and a church that claims certainty in all things will have a limited appeal to those who can't or won't think, but it just won't be taken seriously by most.

Consider what has happened to the Bible. The Bible is rendered ineffective as the instrument of God's word to man by those who would defend its historic accuracy in absolute terms. When Charles Darwin published "The origin of the Species", and proposed his theory of evolution, churchmen rose up in righteous certainty and denounced the book as wrong and the work of the devil. The church's sense of certainty was threatened. The Bible says God created in six days. Darwin suggested that it took millions of years. But rather than listen and learn, rather than trust in the providence and sovereignty of God who is the only certainty, the church fought an unwise battle. The result was that Christianity was discredited in the minds of many thinking people. Well, incredibly, that particular battle is still being fought by some, and everytime it is fought the Christian faith loses a little more credibility.

Psychiatry and Philosophy are asking serious questions in this age of uncertainty. The old concepts of free will and individual responsibility are held up to the inquiry of men who say that we're really just a product of our environment, or our subconscious drives. And to respond to that in hysteria and call it godless and sinful is nonsense. In Philosophy one book in particular comes to mind. Richard Rubenstein has written a collection of

under the title "After Auschuitz" and in the course of the series poses some very serious questions for anyone who claims to believe in God. "How, after Auschuitz," asks Rubenstein, is it possible to believe in a personal God who is supposed to be revealing his will in the confines of history?" How does a Jew believe in light of six million Jewish corpses? Rubenstein concludes that it is no longer possible. Now, I'm not in Dr. Rubenstein's league, but I don't buy his conclusions. The point, however, is that his question is a legitimate question; the kind of question the world keeps asking: and while the answer may not be found, to ignore the question, to be threatened by its being asked, is simply to be discredited and dismissed as irrelevant.

Consider morality. For twenty centuries the Christian Church and Christian people have operated very comfortably on the premise that right is right and wrong is wrong and everybody knows the difference. And in case anybody missed the difference churchmen were only to happy to point it out. In matters of sex the prescription was simply "don't", at least until you are married - and then try not to enjoy it too much. In matters of killing the prescription was a little more complex: don't unless you have to, or unless your government tells you to. And all of a sudden we find ourselves in a brand new and very uncertain situation. Suddenly we have kids who mature earlier, and are told that sex is to be used on every television commercial they've seen since infancy, and who have cars and drive-ins and apartments, and pills, and no money to get married at 19 and they're asking "why not?" Suddenly we're confronted with something like a 25% statistic of brides who are pregnant, a full blown venereal disease epidemic, and the real possibility of available abortions. And for too many Christians the whole thing can still be reduced to an arrogant "don't". It's not too surprising that nobody seems to be listening anymore.

We live in an uncertain age, and age which I believe needs a church that knows how to exist with uncertainty, a church that doesn't run away from serious questions and doubts, a church that doesn't abandon hurting, bleeding

people by hiding behind dogma and arrogant certainty. I believe the world needs that kind of church, and I believe people need that kind of religion. For no matter how you cut it you and I live in both environments, and there is no one here unfamiliar with some very painful uncertainty.

I began this morning by reading three sections of the Epistle to the Hebrews. We've come a long way so let me tell you the essence of each. The first was a kind of classic statement of Christian doctrine: Jesus Christ is presented as the full revelation of God. In the second there were two very remarkable sentences: "Let us stop discussing the rudiments of Christianity . . . . Instead, let us advance toward maturity." The third offered some advice in basic Christian ethics and concluded with the very significant statement, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever."

I don't think that needs much interpreting. It was written to a group of early Christians who were spending too much time talking about their theology - and not enough time living their new life in obedience to their Lord. They needed to be reminded that there is only one thing that never changes, only one absolute - namely Jesus Christ.

There is a good and concise word in that for us. We live in an uncertain age, when everything seems to be up in the air. All of us face some kind of crises: all of us bleed alittle bit as a result of uncertainty: all of us need something firm and unshakable. For some of us the crises is a product of the times: we're nervous and anxious about our country - the world - how and if things are going to get resolved. Some of us worry about the kind of world our children are inheriting, and lose more than a little sleep over it. Some of us face an uncertain personal future: we just don't know what will happen to us - what next year will bring. Some of us are in the middle of personal crises - grief over the death of a loved one, sickness, marital strain. All of us, in some form or another, stand in need of certainty.

It is here offered. Not a list of theological propositions: not a

collection of churchy rituals and traditions - but a savior: one who means God's love: Jesus Christ.

I'm not comfortable using my family as a source of sermon illustrations. But they keep happening in a way that is more relevant to me than all the theology I've ever read. And I'd like to share this one. At dinner last week, out of the clear blue sky as always, I was asked what it's like to be in heaven. One of them volunteered that if she died and went to heaven she'd probably just sit around and cry a lot.

I think we got it resolved, but that's a kind of ultimate uncertainty that I think a lot of us carry around in our hearts. How do you respond to that? What do you know for sure? Where is that certainty? As I reflected about it later I found myself driven back through all the theological decora-tons, all the church programs, all the books I've read - to something Paul said "For I am certain that nothing in all creation can separate me from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord" - and to that little statement in Hebrews - "Jesus Christ is the same yeterday, today and for ever."

That, to use the vernacular, is where it's at. If all else falls that stands. I am loved of God. Nothing will interfere with that. No matter what else alters that remains certain. Jesus Christ - yesterday - today - for ever.

Amen.

Almighty God, we are grateful that in the midst of an uncertain world some things never change. Grant us to know the serenity of faith in him whose grace and love are with us forever - Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.